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State lags in improving quality of life for kids

Racial disparity grows on health issues

December 4, 2007

BY SUZETTE HACKNEY

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The quality of life for Michigan's children continues to worsen, despite improvements in toddler immunizations, teenage pregnancy rates and the number of teens who binge drink and smoke, according to a study to be released today by two Michigan child advocacy groups.

The Kids Count in Michigan study also shows a growing disparity between African-American children and their white counterparts in a number of wide-ranging health issues, like child mortality rates, child abuse and neglect, and the number of children living in poverty.

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"What is troubling is that we're seeing substantial cuts" in public services "that disproportionately affect low-income children, even as we see an increase in child poverty," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, director of the Michigan League for Human Services, the other group involved in the study.

"Many more children are living in pretty desperate circumstances. Overall, we've made some limited progress toward improving the health and well-being of our children, but we're not seeing the kinds of improvements that are going to move us forward at the rate that we need."

Michigan children have achieved only three of the 18 Healthy People 2010 targets to improve the well-being of Americans -- in toddler immunizations, teen pregnancy rates and fewer kids getting into physical fights in high school. The targets were developed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Health and other national agencies.

But they still lag when it comes to some other targets, such as weight, exercise, low birth weight and preterm births.

"This isn't pie-in-the-sky stuff; these are reasonable goals," Zehnder-Merrell said. "We're looking at halfway through the decade, and the results don't suggest that we can make these substantial changes in the last five years to see a huge improvement."

Other improvements did occur, however. Michigan students who used tobacco or binge drank dropped by about one quarter from 2000 to 2005. In addition, the number of children who tested positive for lead poisoning fell by nearly half, to 2,300 from 4,300, even with increased testing among low-income, high-risk children.

"Overall we're really excited by the improvements, because we're experiencing some difficult times in Michigan," said Lynn Burdell, director of programs for YouthBuild Detroit. "We could use some good news."

Still, Burdell said the only way to see improvements -- and those that transcend racial lines -- is to continue to direct programs and resources toward underrepresented minorities.

"We know where there are significant concentrations of African Americans who are experiencing these deficits,"

<http://www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=State+lags+in+improving+quality+of+life+...> 12/4/2007

Burdell said. "We need to make sure we're addressing health, specifically, as we work with our families. We often focus on the economic, and that's important, but we also need to focus on health."

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IN OUR OPINION

Close the health gap for kids

December 4, 2007

Race and poverty remain unfortunate predictors of well-being for Michigan children. Even as the state makes steady progress toward 18 national health goals for all children, poor, African-American kids are still lagging.

The latest Kids Count report underscores the persistent disparities and cries out for a shift in policy to help children improve equally. Two of the more telling aspects of Michigan's health divide are the rate of teen deaths and teenage pregnancies between 2000 and 2005.

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Solid strides have been achieved in reducing deaths among children aged 1 to 14; they dropped 11%. But the decline rings a little hollow when viewed along racial lines. The 2005 death rate for elementary-aged white children was 12 per 100,000, compared with 29 among African Americans.

These figures sadly point up what Michigan already knows. There's too much talk and not enough action being deployed toward safer communities. That's true for government, but even more among communities where citizens, the people closest to the problem, have to take a more public and vigilant anti-crime stance.

The Michigan Department of Community Health and children health advocates ought to ensure its pregnancy prevention efforts are being reinforced, not relaxed, across the state. While Michigan fell well below the national target rate of pregnancies among teens at 28 per 1,000, it's only a partial victory.

The message isn't going far enough, given that the rate among African-American teens hovers well above the nation, at 60 pregnancies per 1,000 girls. Between 2000 and 2005, it dropped only 5%. Such minimal progress isn't good enough for young African-America girls or the bar Michigan seeks to raise.

Home is by far the best place to teach awareness and personal responsibility. But since the state pays the economic and social costs of teen pregnancy, legislators ought also to fight harder for wider access to programs that teach decision-making and the long-term benefits of focusing on education.

Addressing the gap that race has created in the lives of children raises the quality of life for everyone.

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Tuesday, December 4, 2007

Kids Count figures are mixed

Report finds improvement in Michigan, but child death, abuse numbers up.

Oralandar Brand-Williams / The Detroit News

LANSING -- A greater percentage of Michigan's children are born underweight or dying at birth, according to the 2007 Kids Count in Michigan report to be released today.

The report found more children abused and neglected and that black children lag whites in most of the 18 health indicators, adding to the state's risk of failing to achieve many national health improvement goals by 2010.

There was some good news: Fewer Michigan teens reported binge drinking or smoking, and teen pregnancy rates dropped.

More needs to be done to meet the goals, said Michele Corey, community advocacy director at Michigan's Children, a partner in the project that issued the report. "There are abuse and neglect programs that really need to be beefed up," she said. "They also need to be bolstered in a much more targeted and significant way."

The report found an estimated 1,000 Michigan infants died before reaching their first birthday in 2005. That rate was virtually unchanged between 2000 and 2005. For the 2006 fiscal year, 28,840 children were found to be victims of abuse or neglect, according to the report. Between 2000 and 2006, the rate of child abuse increased 10 percent, from 10.4 to 11.4 per 1,000 children from birth to age 17.

The report examines 18 health goals for children and teens in the state's 83 counties and the city of Detroit. The standards are set by the Healthy People 2010, a national initiative aimed at achieving goals of health and well-being.

Corey said a lack of money for prevention programs is part of the problem.

"We have seen some disinvestments at the state levels," said Corey. "We try as much as we can to protect them, but we have seen a decline in those programs in 2000."

The report also showed 12 percent of Michigan high schoolers as overweight, up from 11 percent in 2001, and that the state's youths are exercising too little.

Michigan did show improvement on 14 of the 18 indicators between 2000 and 2005.

Among the improvements was the drop in binge drinking and in smoking among Michigan teens. Both showed a 25 percent decline.

The state's teen pregnancy rate is also declining. In 2005, it was 28 per 1,000 teens (ages 15-17).

The figures were well below the Healthy People 2010 target of 43 per 1,000.

The report also indicates that more Michigan toddlers are being immunized. The report found the rate for immunization among young children in Michigan reached the HP 2010 target rate of 80 percent by 2002.

But racial disparities still exist. African-American and Hispanic children are three times more likely to live in poverty than white children.

"The news isn't so good for children of color," said Corey. "We just need to acknowledge that and figure out some strategies that will really work for these populations."

The 200-page report also concluded that lead poisoning continues to plague some of Michigan's children.

The state ranks sixth in the nation for the number of children identified as having lead poisoning.

The percentage of children ages 1-6 tested for lead rose dramatically between 1998 to 2000 and 2003-05, from 7 percent to 12 percent.

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Published December 4, 2007



(Photo by BECKY SHINK/Lansing State Journal)

Art class: Mt. Hope Elementary School first-grader Natajsia Garcia listens to art teacher Lori Reuben while working on a project Monday morning. The Kids Count in Michigan Data Book, compiled from state statistics by the Michigan League for Human Services, offers data on the tricounty area.

See the report

To see an online copy of the Michigan Kids Count report, go to www.kidscount.org.

Study: Fewer moms getting prenatal care

More Mich. kids live in poverty, report says

Derek Wallbank
Lansing State Journal

Kelly Schalter is 16 weeks pregnant.

She has been to two prenatal visits so far, and she's sworn her doctor to secrecy as to whether the child is a boy or girl.

Right now, the 26-year-old Holt mother's biggest worry is what to name the baby, as she used her top two names on her previous children, 3-year-old Aria and 20-month-old Dominic.

But thousands of women in the tri-county area are not so fortunate.

For them, the worry is whether they'll have a doctor at all.

The number of moms-to-be lacking adequate prenatal care has more than doubled in the last five years, according to a report released today.

The annual Kids Count in Michigan Data Book also shows that more Michigan children are overweight and live in poverty, while cases of child abuse and neglect have soared in Eaton and Clinton counties.

The data was compiled from state statistics by the Michigan League for Human Services. A similar national report was released in July.

While the number of women seeking prenatal care rose by 4 percent across the state from 2000 to 2005, the number in Lansing dropped dramatically. The number of pregnant women without care doubled.

The reasons aren't clear.

"The truth is, we don't have a good answer for that," said Marcus Cheatham, an assistant deputy health officer with the Ingham County Health Department.

Increasing poverty

Some point to declining economy and increasing poverty rates.

The number of children living in poverty - less than \$15,000 for a single parent with two children - has spiked in recent years.

Clinton County has the second-lowest percentage of children living in poverty in the state, yet that percentage has almost tripled from 2000 to 2004, the last year data was available. Eaton and Ingham counties showed a similar increase.

"More women don't have health insurance," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, senior research associate for the League for Human Services.

The poorest women can access Medicaid dollars and pregnancy assistance programs, while others have a good benefits package or enough money to not worry about the bills.

But those in the middle are the ones who can't afford it.

"And there are increasingly more people in the middle who get caught," she said.

Schalter said she's thankful to have insurance.

"My pregnancies have been pretty normal, but there have been some things that have come up which you want to be able to take care of," she said.

More abuse reported

Another indicator of declining quality of life for children is in the number of child abuse and neglect cases reported across the state.

Numbers decreased in Ingham, but spiked in Eaton and Clinton counties.

Jim Nye, director of field operations for the Department of Human Services, credited much of the increases to teachers and school nurses knowing how to spot and report abuse or neglect.

"They become more astute at determining what would be an abusive or neglectful circumstance," he said.

But Nye cautioned against reading too much into the data, saying that in smaller counties like Eaton and Clinton, even moving two large sibling groups could skew the numbers.

Teen behavior better

There was good news for high school students. Teen pregnancies are down and fewer teens are binge drinking or using tobacco products.

"We are trying to change community expectations, to create an expectation that younger people will not drink," said Grand Ledge Chief of Police Martin Underhill. "From my perspective that has been successful."

The numbers of teens attempting suicide are down, though 9 percent of high schoolers said they'd tried.

Kevin Epling of East Lansing knows that pain firsthand. His son Matthew took his life in 2002 at age 14, after being bullied by older students.

Epling said those statistics won't change until parents start talking with their teens about suicide.

"It's an extremely tough thing to talk about. It's a parent's worst nightmare," he said. "But talking about suicide prevention and depression should be no different than talking about AIDS, drunk driving and unplanned pregnancy."

Young students excel

Math scores increased among fourth- and eighth- graders but fell among high school seniors - a testament, Zehnder-Merrill said, to increased math standards for older students.

High schoolers are now required to take the Michigan Merit Exam, a tougher test than the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test it replaced.

In fact, Michigan State University math professor William Brown said he's actually seen students' math abilities rise in recent years.

There is one class some say where students could invest more time.

Michigan is home to more overweight children than four years ago, ranking 20th nationally. Twelve percent of Michigan high school students are overweight today, while 62 percent don't exercise at least three times a week.

At Charlotte High School, physical education teacher Steve Myers says there is a real need to encourage activity among students.

"We have obese kids in every one of our physical education classes," he said. "I don't think they're looking down the road at the problems it can cause."

Myers said that for the last seven years, the school has offered a "Fun in Fitness" class. Students are allowed to choose their activity, with one requirement.

"It has to be something cardiovascular, something that raises your heart rate," explained Myers.

Myers said students also are encouraged to get involved in lifetime sports, like bowling or ice skating. "We try to keep the kids open to different things."

Lansing Community News reporters Kurt Madden and Rachel Greco also contributed to this report. Contact Derek Wallbank at 267-1301 or dwallbank@lsj.com.

Kids pay price as economy slides

Posted by [Ted Roelofs | The Grand Rapids Press](#) December 04, 2007
07:45AM

Categories: [Breaking News](#), [Top Stories](#)

Nearly one in six Kent County children lived in poverty in 2006, another sign Michigan's distressed economy has hit home.

The percentage of county children ages 5 to 17 in poverty spiked from 9.1 percent in 2000 to 16.1 percent in 2006. That was less than the state average of 17 percent. But the rate of increase -- 77 percent -- far outpaced the state's average increase of 42 percent during that time.

Andy Zylstra, director of Kent County's Department of Human Services, said the numbers are troubling.

"That's a significant increase. It is surprising to see that number going up like that. Obviously, that is very concerning for the future."

Zylstra said the numbers likely reflect the shift from good-paying manufacturing jobs that could support a family to low-wage service sector jobs. As a result, families without job skills or education are dropping from the middle class.

"More of your middle-class jobs, the kind that really fueled the economy in the past, those jobs are disappearing," Zylstra said.

There are other signs of trouble for area children, according to a report released by Kids Count in Michigan, a nonprofit child advocate group.

The county's infant mortality rate also climbed, from 7.7 percent in 2000 to 8.2 percent in 2005. Nearly one-fourth of the county's children received less than adequate prenatal care in 2005, according to a report released today by Kids Count.

Several other area counties had sharp increases in poverty.

In Ottawa County, the number of children ages 5 to 17 in poverty increased from 5 percent in 2000 to 7.2 percent in 2004, a 44 percent jump. In Barry

County, the rate climbed from 7 percent to 10 percent, a 43 percent increase; for Allegan County, it increased by 36 percent.

The Kids Count numbers do not reflect poverty numbers from 2006, which are not available for many rural counties.

Loren Snippe, director of the Ottawa County DHS, found the poverty numbers surprising as well.

"Would I expect an increase? Yes. Would I expect an increase of that magnitude? That surprises me a little bit."

Snippe said Ottawa County is beginning to wrestle with some of the same social problems as more urbanized areas.

"We are no longer this isolated community on the Lakeshore. We are experiencing the same issues as some of the urban counties in Michigan, as our county grows and becomes more diverse."

Snippe said the economic distress also is reflected in the county's number of food stamp cases. For 2000, they stood at about 1,500. At the end of 2006, they exceeded 5,500.

In Kent County, the number of cases stood at about 12,000 at the end of 2000. As of this past June, they exceeded 30,000.

The director of a Grand Rapids-based food bank for children said poverty for many children means an empty stomach at night. And many arrive home to a household with no adult present.

"There really is just a huge demand for these services," said Bridget Clark-Whitney, director of Kids Food Basket.

Clark-Whitney said her agency delivers evening meals each day to 1,200 elementary-age children at schools in Grand Rapids and Wyoming. Many of these children would not otherwise have a dinner, she said.

Clark-Whitney said her agency serves 11 schools. There are 14 more schools on a waiting list.

Kids' health slipping in state, county

Posted by [GAZETTE NEWS SERVICE / LINDA S. MAH | GAZETTE](#)
December 04, 2007 08:24AM

DETROIT -- Michigan is seeing its percentages of overweight high school students, underweight babies and child abuse go up, putting the state at risk of missing national health-improvement goals, according to the annual Kids Count in Michigan report.

Although fewer Michigan teens say they're binge drinking or using tobacco, the report found that more are getting too little exercise. The state's black children lag behind whites in most of the 18 health areas examined, according to the report, released today, although black teens were about half as likely as whites to report binge drinking or tobacco use.

"We're clearly not making a big priority of making sure kids are as healthy as they can be," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, senior research associate with the Michigan League for Human Services in Lansing and Kids Count in Michigan project director.

Unless the state acts more decisively in the next few years, Michigan will fail to meet many goals for children in the federal government's 10-year Healthy People 2010 public health plan, the report said.

In many ways, Kalamazoo County mirrors Michigan on children's health issues, Zehnder-Merrell said.

She noted that Kalamazoo County has high percentages of pre-term births, low birthweight and mothers receiving inadequate prenatal care.

"Those indicators are actually worsening in Kalamazoo, and at the state level they're barely making any improvement," Zehnder-Merrell said. "What is particularly troubling is that when you look at these indicators for children and break out the rates by race, the rates for African-Americans are routinely at least double, and in the case of infant mortality, triple the rate of whites."

But the news is not all negative for Kalamazoo County, Zehnder-Merrell said. Children in the county are faring better in recent years in terms of

births to teen mothers, immunization rates, lead poisoning and asthma hospitalizations, she said.

Births to teens in the county, for example, went from 33.8 percent in 2000 to 30.4 percent in 2005, which was below the state level of 33.6 percent.

The Kalamazoo County Multi-Purpose Collaborative Body -- made up of representatives of families, schools, courts, mental health agencies and the Department of Human Services -- planned to hold a news conference at 9 this morning at the Free Clinic of Kalamazoo to discuss the new Kids Count report, which is available online.

"The overall message is that health goes beyond access to health care," Zehnder-Merrell said. "Community and state policy needs to focus on strategies to address these issues. We have No Child Left Behind and we keep lifting our expectations of what kids should be able to do in school, but we're not focusing on making improvements in their health. The bottom line is unhealthy children cannot be successful students."

Gazette staff writer Linda S. Mah contributed to this report.



Kids Count, but they struggle

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

JILL ARMENTROUT

THE SAGINAW NEWS

Saginaw County health, education and social welfare agencies are re-focusing their efforts after a report showed nearly a 5 percentage point increase in the number of children living in poverty.

The percent of children from birth to 17 living in poverty in Saginaw County increased to 23.4 percent in 2004 from 19.1 percent in 2000 -- up 23 percent to include 12,286 children, data from an annual Kids Count report shows.

Figures indicate that the state rate in 2004 was

17.3 percent. The Kids Count numbers reflect children in families with incomes below the poverty threshold, which is \$19,157 for a family of four in 2004.

"We know parents struggle to make ends meet here, and it's not getting better for some," said Suzanne Greenberg, president and chief executive for the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Saginaw County, which provides prevention education and advocacy for children.

"Neglect numbers here are much higher than other counties, including children with inadequate food or those left alone. Parents are making choices between food and heat. I hate to blame (abuse or neglect) on the economy, but it doesn't help."

The Kids Count in Michigan Data Book for 2007 examines 18 wide-ranging health goals for children and teens that Healthy People 2010 sets. The national initiative aims to advance health and well-being.

Michigan is making progress, researchers on the project say, but it's not fast enough to meet the goals in many areas, and minority children and youths are further behind in meeting most of the targets.

Areas where the state experienced worsening rates included low-birthweight infants and rates of child abuse or neglect.

The roughly 11,000 Michigan babies born weighing less than five and a half pounds in 2005 suffer from elevated risk of developmental delay, chronic health problems and even death. The rate of 9 percent of Saginaw County babies born at low birth weights during 2003-2005 remained steady from 1998-2000. Statewide, the rate increased to 8.3 percent from 7.9 percent.

Also following the negative trend in the state, the rate per 1,000 children who were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect in Saginaw County increased to 20.1 in 2006 from 14.2 in 2000 -- a 41 percent increase. That compares to the statewide rate of 11.4 in 2006, up from 10.4 in 2000. Children in investigated families in Saginaw County increased during that period by 27 percent from 80 to 101.2 per 1,000 in 2006, compared to the state rate of 62.6 for 2006.

The rate of children in the county living in out-of-home care because of abuse or neglect increased by 58 percent in that period, to 9.4 from 6 per 1,000 children. The state rate in 2006 was 6.6.

"These increases align with what we are seeing at our agency," Greenberg said. "The number of children in our advocacy center are up 30 percent this year over last year. This data doesn't surprise me, but it saddens me. I'm really glad our services are here.

"The hopeful side is that many of us in these agencies can work together to make a continuum of services. For me, that is the hope. Prevention is key. If we are working with parents right from the beginning, that will help prevent these problems."

The Saginaw County Great Start Collaborative of dozens of agencies is working with a \$165,000 grant to tackle a strategic plan that lays out 15 goals and a breakdown of duties to get them started over the next year. They address physical and emotional health care, day care and preschools and parenting education and family support. Greenberg serves as facilitator of the group, which she said "is huge for families."

The state reached goals for immunization of toddlers and teen pregnancy, but the achievements mask substantial disparities by race, said Michele Corey, community advocacy director at Michigan's Children, a partner in the project.

Rates on these measures are much worse for black children, who also are three times more likely to live in poverty than white children, have roughly triple the rates of infant mortality and double the rates for low-birthweight babies, she said.

Saginaw County's rate of 39 per thousand teens 15 to 17 who became pregnant in 2003-2005 also beats the 2010 target of 43, but is higher than the state rate of 30 for that period. The county immunized 75 percent of toddlers in 2006, not quite meeting the goal of 80 percent.

In 2006, 10.2 babies died per thousand live births in the city of Saginaw. The rate was 7.1 for Saginaw County, compared to Michigan's rate of 7.4 deaths per thousand births. The 2010 target is five deaths per thousand.

The rates dropped from 2005, but a disparity between white and black babies dying remains in Saginaw County, with a ratio of black to white infant deaths of 2.5 to 1 for 2006. The city's rate of black babies dying is the second worst in the state behind Pontiac, state data shows.

A leadership summit to address the problems of infant mortality and premature births in Saginaw County drew about 50 health and education professionals in recent weeks. A committee is working on an action plan to increase participation in county services for pregnant women and decrease barriers.

The EPA recently awarded the Faith Based Lead Poisoning Prevention Project of Saginaw a \$100,000 grant to address the health hazard over the next two years in the city of Saginaw.

Kids Count data shows the rate of children 1-6 in Saginaw County tested for lead poisoning more than doubled to 15.3 percent in 2003-2005 from 6.8 percent in 1998-2000. The rate of those with elevated blood lead levels dropped to 1.8 percent from 4.4 percent in that same period. These numbers are better than statewide figures of 12.4 percent of children tested in 2003-2005, with 2.6 percent of those with elevated levels. High levels of lead in children can cause learning disabilities, seizures and death.

The goal for 2010 is zero children with lead poisoning, so Saginaw's outreach grant will help get to those families "hardest to reach," said Pamela L. Smith, manager of the Saginaw Lead Hazard Control Program.

"Now that we are closer to that goal, we've got to do some innovative and creative things to get the word out. The grant will include a Fred Lead character to go out and educate those who haven't heard about the risk."

Kids Count in Michigan is a collaborative project of the Michigan League for Human Services and Michigan's Children, a Lansing-based advocacy group. The project is part of a national effort to improve conditions for children and their families, with funding provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Detroit-based Skillman Foundation, the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation, and local United Ways.

The Michigan League for Human Services is a non-profit organization dedicated to education, research and advocacy for the benefit of low-income and other vulnerable citizens in the state. Visit www.milhs.org to view the entire report. v

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Abuse cases on rise

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

By Monetta L. Harr

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The number of Jackson County children and teens who have been confirmed victims of abuse or neglect has risen 131 percent from 2000 to 2006, according a report released today.

"That's astounding," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, senior research associate of the Michigan League for Human Services, which prepared the statewide "Kids Count" report.

Kids Count tracks trends in the well-being of infants through teens. It examines 18 wide-ranging health goals set by Healthy People 2010, a national initiative for health and well-being.

The number of Jackson County children and teens confirmed to be victims of abuse or neglect rose from 365 in 2000, to 845 in 2006. The number of cases investigated rose from 2,779 to 4,234.

Tanda Reynolds, director of the Jackson office of Department of Human Services, offered three explanations: the growing number of people trained and mandated to report abuse; the level of poverty; and several high-profile cases that generated more referrals.

"The more people you educate to report abuse, the more referrals you get. Our child-protection law has mandatory reporters, a group that has grown over the years, that is required by law to report suspected child abuse," Reynolds said.

The medical community, law enforcement and schools are the top three reporters of suspected abuse, she said. Clergy now are also being trained in what to look for.

Poverty contributes in many ways, from caregivers working two or three jobs to maintain even a median standard of living, to living from crisis to crisis.

One of the recent high-profile cases involved Ricky Holland, who lived for a time in Jackson before moving to Ingham County. His parents were convicted of his murder in 2006.

"I believe child abuse is reported more and confirmed more," Reynolds said.

Other categories range from pregnancy rates for teens, to toddler immunization. Jackson County worsened in five of nine categories.

"The fact that we have made such minimal progress on so many of these should be a call to action that our children's health should be more of a priority at the state and local levels," Zehnder-Merrell said.

The target date to reach these goals is 2010, which seemed attainable when they were set by national health experts in 2000, said Zehnder-Merrell.

Locally, the best news is that pregnancy among girls ages 15 to 17 has already dropped to the target number of 43 per 1,000 females.

"It's a reason to celebrate. It reverberates in teen births and teen dropout rates, so this is a good piece of news," Zehnder-Merrell said.

Infant mortality also improved, as did the number of children tested and treated for lead poisoning.

However, the number of infants through age 4 who were hospitalized for asthma has risen. The goal is to have only 25 per 10,000 children, but Jackson County had 186 between 2003-2005, which was up from 164 in 1998-2000.

This is a huge problem, said Ken Toll, executive director of United Way of Jackson County, because asthma is a chronic disease that can be managed with proper medical access.

Instead, these children are being hospitalized for a couple of days until they start breathing better, thus costing much more money than children who routinely see a physician.

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Poverty snares kids in county

Number of needy up in tough times

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

By **Shantell M. Kirkendoll**

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Tough times in Genesee County are having a huge impact on children, who are increasingly living in poverty and signing up for free meals, according to an annual report.

The newest findings of Kids Count in Michigan - a report on the well-being of children by analyzing statistics from their health to how they do in school - point to some gains in math skills, but, by and large, show a grim picture of what life is like at home.

About 26,000 Genesee County children ages 17 and younger lived in poverty in 2004, a 22 percent jump since 2000.

Last school year, 35,199 received a free or reduced-cost school lunch. To qualify for the meal program, a family of three must make no more than \$31,000 a year.

Living in poverty literally may be tearing families apart. In 2006, slightly more than 12 percent of Genesee County children lived in out-of-home care because of abuse or neglect. That's one of the highest rates in Michigan.

"When you look at the stresses families have, financial worries are up there," said Gail Stimson, president and executive director of Priority Children, a Flint-based child advocacy group.

"This doesn't mean every poor family is abusive, but (financial worries) start to be a tipping point. Poverty and abuse is not a cause and effect, but there's certainly a connection."

The Kids Count report showed some progress despite the financial challenges.

Figures show a significant increase in the number of children tested for lead poisoning - an average of 5,211 in 2003-2005, compared to 2,231 in 1998-2000 - and fewer had high lead levels.

A national trend of a drop in teen pregnancy is apparent in the county, where pregnancies among girls ages 15-19 fell 22 percent.

But low birthweight babies continue to be an issue in the county, where one in 10 babies weighs 5 1/2 pounds or less at birth. This could reflect a premature birth or the mother's poor health.

County children also still lag behind the rest of Michigan in math skills, although they made gains from previous years. In 2006-2007, 16.4 percent of fourth-graders did not meet math standards, compared to 15.4 percent statewide.

During the 2002-2003 school year, half of eighth-graders underperformed on math tests; in 2006-2007, that number was only 38.2 percent. But across the state, only 31.9 percent missed math standards.

QUICK TAKE

Kids in poverty

Michigan children, ages 17 and younger, living in poverty:

2000 2004

21,547 26,350

Source: Kids Count in Michigan 2007 report

Poverty also may have an impact on how well children do in school, said Terri Stangl, executive director of the Center for Civil Justice.

Impoverished families move more as they search for affordable housing. Along with missed meals, this mobility contributes to poorer performance in the classroom.

"Genesee County has challenges ahead of it," she said. "Education is part of the long-term process of getting out of poverty."

The Kids Count report is put together by groups including the Michigan League for Human Services and Michigan's Children.

The report was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Skillman Foundation, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation and local United Ways.

On the Net:

Kids Count: www.aecf.org/kidscount

Michigan League for Human Services: www.milhs.org

Michigan's Children: www.michiganschildren.org

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Article published Dec 4, 2007
Michigan kids missing the health mark
Elizabeth Huff
The Enquirer

Michigan kids are not on target to meet many of the Healthy People 2010 goals set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, according to 2007 Kids Count data to be released today. The report measures key factors influencing children's health.

While fewer children say they are smoking and binge drinking, more children are overweight and not exercising enough.

"What the really big story in Michigan is this remarkable increase in children living in poverty between 2000 and 2005," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, senior research associate for the Michigan League for Human Services.

They are kids like Eva Caldwell's 4-year-old son, Zach Taylor, who is on Medicaid, attends Head Start — a preschool program for economically disadvantaged children and families — and for whom she receives food stamps.

Caldwell, 37, of Battle Creek is afraid Zach and her other children will grow up with the stigma of being children on welfare.

"When they're young, they don't know they're on it," she said. "But when they get older, they know. ... I don't want them on that."

MORE CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY

The percentage of children in poverty had been in decline since the mid-1990s, but has risen to 19.5 percent of Calhoun County children and 17.3 percent of Michigan children in 2004.

There also were more than twice as many children on MICHild, a state- and federally funded health insurance program, and one-and-a-half times as many kids on Medicaid in 2006 compared to data in 2000.

"Poverty influences not just access to medical care but a whole range of factors," Zehnder-Merrell said, such as access to nutritious foods, access to mental health services and access to adequate prenatal care.

STATE TEEN PREGNANCY RATE STILL HIGH

The teen pregnancy rate has declined at about the same pace as the state since the mid-1990s, but Calhoun County still ranks among the highest in Michigan.

Between 1998 and 2000, Michigan already met the national Healthy People 2010 goal and has seen improved rates since then.

Calhoun County, however, remained one of only a few counties in Michigan to have a higher rate than the national target of no more than 4.3 percent of teen girls ages 15-17.

Between 1998 and 2000, an average of 5.3 percent of Calhoun County girls ages 15-17 were pregnant. Between 2003 and 2005, the average declined to 4.6 percent.

"That's a pretty substantial decline," Zehnder-Merrell said. "Although you're not at the Healthy People target. ... I would take that as a good news indicator, compared to the preterm births."

INCREASES SEEN

Although Calhoun County has had better overall health indicators for babies since the early 1990s, some indicators have worsened.

The percentage of low-birthweight babies in 2005 in Calhoun County rose above the state average for the first time since 1993 to 8.4 percent of total births, compared to 8.3 percent of Michigan births. The state percentage also increased from 8.2 percent the year before.

The percent of preterm babies born before 37 weeks gestation also rose and is edging close to the state rate of 10.4 percent of all live births in 2005.

And tied closely to these higher rates are infant deaths, said Dottie-Kay Bowersox, health officer for the Calhoun County Department of Public Health. Already, there are 27 confirmed deaths for 2007.

"We have not had this many infant deaths since 1993," she said. "There is no one succinct answer. We don't know why."

Factors influencing a fetus or infant's survival include infections in the uterus, re-infections, the mother's obesity, stress, violence in the home and sexually transmitted diseases, she said.

WAYS TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Although high poverty rates in Michigan and Calhoun County may influence children's health, Bowersox recommends parents help their children be healthy in practical ways. Good nutrition and adequate exercise are key.

"It's important to learn good habits as a child so when you grow older you'll become a healthier adult," she said. "These are behavior choices that we can make for ourselves that don't necessarily increase the cost of our daily lives."

Elizabeth Huff can be reached at 966-0684 or ehuff@battlecr.gannett.com.



Child welfare in Oakland declining

By JERRY WOLFFE
Of The Oakland Press

The number of children receiving less than adequate parental care, being born with lower birth weights, living in poverty and being abused has increased in Oakland County, according to a statewide report released today.

In addition, the 2007 Kids Count in Michigan said fewer Michigan teens are binge drinking and smoking but more children are overweight and exercising too little.

Unless Michigan acts more decisively in the next few years, the state will fail to meet many national standards for healthy children, families and neighborhoods, said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, senior research associate at the Michigan League for Human Services and project director.

"Being healthy is about much more than just making sure a child gets adequate medical care," she said. "The health of our children reflects the conditions in which they live in our communities, such as housing, and the resources in their families and neighborhoods."

The most dramatic improvement reflected declines in substance abuse among teens.

Binge drinking among Michigan high school students dropped by 23 percent and tobacco use by 22 percent between 2000 and 2005, according to the study.

In 2005, 23 percent of high school students reported using tobacco during the previous 30 days compared with 30 percent in 2001.

The rate of students who reported consuming five or more alcoholic drinks within a couple of hours dropped from 29 percent to 23 percent during the same period, the study found.

Twelve percent of high school students were overweight in Michigan compared with the target rate of 5 percent. Only 62 percent of Michigan teens did vigorous exercise compared with the ideal of 85 percent.

However, in order to meet the Healthy People 2010 target of 11 percent of high school students binge drinking, Michigan's 2005 rate would have to drop by half in the last five years of the decade.

In Oakland County, the study found that between 2000 and 2005:

The number of children receiving less than adequate prenatal care jumped to 13.6 percent from 13.1 percent

Infant mortality increased to 6.7 per 1,000 births from 6.2 per 1,000 births

Children living in poverty climbed to 10.1 percent from 7.1 percent

Child abuse rose to 7.2 percent from 4.4 percent

The study also said children removed from their home because of abuse or neglect jumped to 4.2 percent in 2006 from 2.7 percent in 2000. In addition, only 11.4 percent of fourth-graders met math standards in 2006-07 compared with 24 percent in 2002-03. Only 25.2 percent of eighth graders met math standards compared with 35.4 percent in 2002-03 in the county, the study said.

Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson said the county is the fourth richest in the nation. According to the report Oakland had an average wage per job of \$49,277 and monthly child-care costs of \$678.

The state did achieve Healthy People 2010 standards for immunizations for toddlers, teen pregnancy and physical fights among high school students.

HP 2010, a national initiative to advance health and well-being, found the state rate for fully immunized toddlers hit the target of 80 percent. In 2005, the state pregnancy rate of 28 per 1,000 teens, ages 15-17, was well below the target of 43 per 1,000 and the 30 percent of Michigan high school students who reported having been involved in a fight in the previous year fell below the target of 32 percent.

"This good news didn't hold true for everybody," said Michele Corey, community advocacy director at Michigan's Children, a partner in the project.

"These achievements mask substantial disparities by race. Rates on those measures are much worse for African American children who are three times more likely to live in poverty than white children," Corey said.

"Unless we change our strategies dramatically, African American children will not meet the target goals by 2010."

Blacks also have triple the rates of infant mortality, and double the death rates for young children, hospitalizations for asthma among young children and low-birth weight babies, the study found.

"These trends are particularly troubling as these childhood conditions elevate the risk of latter physical or emotional health problems as the children and youth become adults," said Zehnder-Merrell.

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Study: More children living in poverty

By **Lindsay VanHulle**

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TRAVERSE CITY -- Children in northwest Lower Michigan increasingly lived in poverty during the first half of this decade, new state health data show.

The 13 counties in the Record-Eagle's coverage area all posted increases in the number of children from birth to 17 years of age who lived at or below the poverty level from 2000 to 2004, according to the 2007 Kids Count in Michigan Data Book.

The data, to be released today, show gains still are needed to improve children's well-being across the state.

The annual survey, conducted by the nonprofit Michigan League for Human Services, compares Michigan's data to a set of national benchmarks established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Regional immunization rates assessed last year largely bettered both the state average and U.S. goals, and all 13 local counties' teen pregnancy rates in 2005 were below the national benchmark of 43 percent per 1,000 teen girls ages 15-17.

But the findings aren't all good. Although Michigan has improved in most areas surveyed, the gains often are small. And in some cases -- such as low birth weights, which rose from 2000 to 2005 throughout nearly the entire region -- the situation in fact has worsened.

"We're not making the same kinds of improvements in basic care and basic needs as these children are growing up," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, a senior research associate with the league.

Children's health depends not only on access to medical care, but also on the conditions of their families, neighborhoods and communities, she said. She added that studies have shown childhood poverty can lead to high-risk behaviors and other poor health conditions.

"If you're below poverty-level income, you're living in really desperate circumstances," she said. "These are very difficult times for families."

Locally, Crawford County has the highest rate of children living in poverty, at 21.5 percent, the data show. Leelanau County has the lowest, at 10.5 percent, while Grand Traverse County is at 11.6 percent. The statewide rate is 17.3 percent.

The Grand Traverse/Leelanau Department of Human Services has seen a greater number of people seeking assistance in recent years, director Mary Marois said.

Although more people were living in poverty in 2004 than in 2000, Marois said she thinks the region avoided a significant upswing due to a community-wide, poverty-reduction initiative that tries to help people find work and other opportunities.

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Article published Dec 4, 2007

Report: Kids are worse off

St. Clair, Sanilac children see most health conditions decline

By NICOLE GERRING
Times Herald

In many ways, children in the Blue Water Area have become less healthy and safe in the past decade, according to the 2007 Kids Count in Michigan report.

The report, released this morning, shows that in 10 of 17 categories, health conditions for children in St. Clair County have worsened since 2000. Conditions in Sanilac County have gotten worse in nine of the same 17 categories.

The report, issued annually, is based on data collected from federal, state and county health, education and other government agencies.

The Michigan League for Human Services and Michigan's Children, a nonprofit children's advocacy group, collaborate to use the latest data available to produce the report, which measures the state's progress in meeting goals set by Healthy People 2010, a national health initiative.

The report compiles data in the categories of child health, adolescent health, economic security, child safety and education.

The state is making progress in a few areas, the report shows.

Notably, fewer teens are binge drinking and getting in physical fights at school. Another bright spot for Michigan is the state has met goals having children immunized and now has one of the highest national averages, said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, senior research associate at the Michigan League for Human Services.

However, the rate of child poverty has increased in local counties and statewide since 2004, Zehnder-Merrell said.

The rate of St. Clair County children up to 17 years old living in poverty increased from 10.5% in 2000 to 13.4% in 2004. Sanilac County's child-poverty rate increased from 15.9% in 2000 to 19% in 2004. The statewide rate increased from 13.7% to 17.3%.

"It's been well-documented by numerous studies that children in poverty have much worse outcomes in terms of health indicators," Zehnder-Merrell said. "They're at much higher risk of lead poisoning, asthma. In terms of education, they're much more likely to be dropouts and not have success in school."

She said though poverty is increasing, the state is cutting allocations for programs designed to help alleviate poverty and offer assistance.

"It's very disturbing to see this increase in child poverty and this erosion in economic security for many of our families," she said.

The number of child abuse and neglect cases has increased in both St. Clair and Sanilac counties. St. Clair County's rate has increased from 8.6 children out of 1,000 in 2000 to 11.5 out of 1,000 in 2006, according to the report.

Sanilac County's percentage of confirmed cases of abuse or neglect is well above the state average of 11.4 per 1,000

children - increasing from 9.8 out of 1,000 children in 2000 to 16.4 out of 1,000 children in 2006.

A success story for both counties is that the rate of teen pregnancy has dropped. That's good news because teen pregnancies can mean more childhood poverty and other problems, said Sue Amato, health educator at the St. Clair County Health Department.

The rate of teen pregnancies in St. Clair County was 34 out 1,000 teens from 1998 to 2000 and dropped to 27 per 1,000 between 2003 and 2005, according to the Kids Count report. The U.S. target rate is 43 per 1,000.

The health department has increased family-planning education in schools, Amato said.

"We know through our monitoring of the youth behavior survey that kids are waiting longer (to have sex)," she said. "They're still sexually active in high school, but they seem to be using protection more often. ... It's good to see the numbers moving in the right direction."

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Report: state may miss kid health goals

By KIM HOYUM, Journal Staff Writer and the Associated Press

POSTED: December 4, 2007

MARQUETTE — Michigan is seeing its percentage of overweight high school students, underweight babies and abused children go up, putting the state at risk of missing national health improvement goals, according to the annual Kids Count in Michigan report.

Although fewer Michigan teens say they're binge drinking or using tobacco, the report found that more are getting too little exercise.

Steve Peffers, incoming MARESA superintendent, said part of that trend was due to an increase in academic graduation requirements and busy schedules for children.

"While we realize (obesity) is also something we need to work on in helping our students, you need to look back a few years and see how graduation requirements have changed," Peffers said at a press conference this morning.

He added physical education does not get the same emphasis it once did in schools. And while it is a concern to educators, there are no signs that the state plans to increase physical activity requirements soon.

The state's black children lag whites in most of the 18 health areas it examined, according to the report released today.

"It's not quite as critical in the Upper Peninsula, but it is something we want to bring attention to, and that's the racial disparities among children," said Judy Watson Olson, president of the Great Lakes Center for Youth Development.

Unless the state acts more decisively in the next few years, Michigan will fail to meet many goals for children in the federal government's 10-year Healthy People 2010 public health plan, the report said. Watson Olson said Michigan is meeting three out of 18 of the report's goals.

The percentage of low-birthweight babies born to Michigan mothers rose from 7.9 percent in 2000 to 8.3 percent in 2005, despite the goal of trying to get the rate down to 5 percent by 2010.

Connie Koutouzos, director of the Marquette General Health System Women's and Children's Center, said low birthweights are another problem that's hard to nail down.

"Unfortunately, a lot of the causes of preterm birth are unknown," she said.

But, she added, it is a national issue, with one in eight babies born early. Koutouzos said it highlighted

the need for more widespread pre-natal and neo-natal care by health care providers.

Figures in the Kids County report show 11.4 confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect per 1,000 children in 2006, up from 10.3 cases in 2000 and above the 2010 goal of 10 cases per 1,000 children.

Rich Miketinac, director of the Marquette County Department of Human Services, said local data shows increases in cases of abuse or neglect, but the U.P. still has lower rates than the state as a whole.

The numbers went up significantly from 2000, he said. "That was true for Marquette, for the U.P. as a whole, and for the state as a whole."

Factors in the increase may include increased community awareness of abuse reporting and the addition of investigating staff, Miketinac said.

He also addressed the report's finding that increased numbers of children, both locally and throughout the state, are receiving Medicare or are living in poverty.

Miketinac pointed to the economic struggles of the state as part of the problem.

"It's no secret why this is happening," he said.

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Copper Country statistics paint mixed picture of kids condition locally

By DAN SCHNEIDER, DMG Writer

HOUGHTON — Local counties fall on both sides of state averages for key indicators of child well-being according to a report released today.

The Michigan League for Human Services today released the 2007 “Kids Count in Michigan” data book.

The book compiles data from various state agencies including the Michigan Department of Community Health, the state Department of Human Services and the state Department of Education. It presents statistics on numerous factors health experts believe are linked to child well-being.

Dave Mayo-Kiely, director of the Copper Country Human Services Coordinating Board, said the report is an important source of information local human service agencies use.

“Basically, what they use it for is planning for priorities and looking at areas where they need to focus their energies,” he said. “It kind of manifests some of the needs in the community.”

Baraga, Houghton and Ontonagon counties were about middle-of-the-pack compared to statewide numbers for most indicators of young child health.

In Baraga County, the data show 22.1 percent of mothers received less-than-adequate prenatal care in 2005. In Houghton County the percentage was 21.6 and in Ontonagon, 21.9. The state average was 21.9 percent. In Keweenaw County, the report states seven children received less-than-adequate prenatal care in 2005, which the MLHS calculates to be a rate of 36.4 percent.

Mayo-Kiely said the low population of Keweenaw County renders its data less meaningful.

“When you look at numbers for a county that’s as small as Keweenaw, it’s really hard to make any broad statements,” he said.

The MLHS uses a formula called the Kessner Index to gauge prenatal care. The index takes into account factors such as when prenatal care started during the pregnancy and how many times the mother visited a doctor during pregnancy.

Houghton County ranked third and Ontonagon County ranked 12th out of 82 counties for which the report includes data on low-birth-weight babies.

Baraga County ranked 21st among counties in the state for that category.

Houghton was listed 16th out of the 54 counties for which infant mortality rates reported. There were two infant deaths in 2005 in Houghton County and none in Baraga, Keweenaw and Ontonagon counties.

Mayo-Kiely attributed Houghton County’s high standing to the number of services available to expecting mothers locally.

“There’s a lot of programs out there for pregnant women whether they be home-visiting services, to meet with an expecting mother making sure they are getting the nutrition they need, that they know they shouldn’t be smoking, they shouldn’t be drinking,” he said. “I think most families up here are connected with a doctor and I think that the doctors up here do a very good job.”

Mayo-Kiely also pointed to high participation rates in nutrition programs such as the federal WIC program.

Baraga County had the highest rate of births to teens in the four-county area.

There were 15 births to teen mothers in Baraga County in 2005, which the MLHS calculated to a rate of 55.9 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19. It is the third-highest rate among Michigan counties.

Ray Sharp, who analyzes public health data for the Western Upper Peninsula District Health Department, said Baraga's rate of births to teens sets it apart from the direction much of the state and nation are going.

"Baraga is kind of an outlier now where it's not improving as much as the state and national trends," Sharp said. "The national teen pregnancy rate has been in decline for about 17 years. It peaked in 1990."

For local comparison, Houghton county had 23 births to teens in 2005, which calculates to a rate of 16.8 per 1,000 and ranks Houghton fifth-lowest among counties statewide. That rate represents about a 31 percent drop in births to teens between 2000 and 2005.

Sharp also cautioned that the populations of Baraga, Houghton, Keweenaw and Ontonagon counties are so small as to reduce the significance of year-to-year comparisons.

"A few more teen births per year can have a dramatic effect because it's such a small population," Sharp said.

In Keweenaw County, for example, the Kids Count report lists one birth to a teen in 2005, but the MLHS does not calculate a rate per 1,000.

Ontonagon County ranked the 10th-lowest for teen birth rate in 2005, with five births to teens and a rate of 20.8 per 1,000.

Mayo-Kiely attributed the low births-to-teens rate in Houghton County to teens being informed about the challenges inherent in having children at young age.

"I think just good education, making people aware that having a child at 16, 17, 18, 19 is difficult."

The report shows 70 confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect for Houghton County in 2006, down from 80 in 2000.

In Baraga County, the number dropped from 46 to 34. Ontonagon County saw a drop from 33 to 18. In Keweenaw County, the number rose from five to 12.

Dan Schneider can be reached at dschneider@mininggazette.com

Chapter 3: A dog leash and handcuffs

Ricky tells therapist his foster parents tied him to bed, but investigator finds nothing to confirm abuse

December 4, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Third of 14 parts

A Jackson County judge signed the order terminating Casey and Rick Gann's rights to 4-year-old Ricky on Feb. 4, 2002, after delivering this message:

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"It's not right to have Ricky in foster care until he's, you know, 6 or 7 years old, to see if something's going to happen and you're going to be able to take care of him. I don't think either of you are equipped right now to take care of him properly," Family Court Judge Chad Schmucker told the Ganns, who had tried to persuade him otherwise.

"I think this is the only way to give Ricky an opportunity to have a real future, to have the permanency, to have a normal childhood, to do well in school, to thrive. I think Ricky needs this."

Ricky's stories are conflicting

About 2 1/2 weeks later, Ricky's therapist noticed a raw sore on his left wrist. He told her it was from a dog leash that his foster parents, Tim and Lisa Holland, used to tie him to the bed at night. He also said they put handcuffs on his ankles. Therapist Susan Honeck called Child Protective Services.

It took an investigator less than an hour to get to Ricky's Head Start school. Taking the boy aside, Levente Heydrich bent lower to make eye contact. From Ricky, he heard a story similar to the one Ricky had told Honeck.

But Ricky also wavered, saying it happened once, then that it happened every night, Heydrich said. The handcuffs were used when the family played cops and robbers, Ricky said. But there was confusion about whether the mark on his wrist came from the game or being tied up.

Tim and Lisa denied tying him to the bed. They said he'd been dragged by one of their dogs with the leash wrapped around his wrist. But the Hollands did admit using handcuffs when they played cops and robbers and a game where they would capture and hold one another hostage. And Lisa disclosed for the first time that she had a child's harness that she used to restrain Ricky at the supermarket.

Heydrich went to the Hollands the next morning to inspect Ricky's bed. He found nothing to indicate the boy had been tied to it. He lectured the Hollands against using restraints and playing war games and said the Jackson County Department of Human Services had to approve use of a harness, but he closed the case without confirming abuse. The boy's story had contradictions, the mark could have been caused by walking the dog, and the Hollands' home was neat and clean and seemed to be in order.

By this time, the Hollands had two other foster children. One was Trevor, Ricky's 7-week-old half-brother, who had been placed with them after his birth on Dec. 30, 2001. The other child was an 11-month-old boy. Both seemed in good

health.

Heydrich never spoke to Ricky's therapist. He had other cases and didn't have time. He later said he was getting four or five new cases a week and his ongoing caseload stood at more than 20.

Ricky was opening up more to Honeck, talking about "Mr. Bloody Bones" who locked him in the basement for a time-out. Then he told her in a Feb. 28 session that he was no longer being tied to the bed, saying, "Mom and I promised that I will stay in my bed and she won't tie me to it."

Lisa Holland canceled Ricky's next two sessions with Honeck and began lobbying his foster care worker, Theresa Bronsberg, to stop them altogether. Honeck argued that it was too soon to end therapy and, in any case, Ricky needed a closing session. He never got it. His last visit with Honeck was in April, though the DHS had authorized her services through August.

Bronsberg seemed satisfied that the drugs prescribed by his psychiatrist, which eventually included an antidepressant to help Ricky sleep, were enough. In early March, the psychiatrist, Dr. Aurif Abedi, had observed Ricky with Lisa and saw nothing to suggest an abusive relationship. Ricky himself had said he was very happy.

Over the next five months, Lisa repeatedly told Abedi that Ricky was out of control -- he was defiant and not sleeping well -- and she couldn't handle him. Abedi adjusted Ricky's medications, cautioning Lisa to watch for side effects.

Also during this time, the Hollands dutifully reported to the DHS a series of injuries to Ricky. He cut his thumb on broken glass. He pinched his hand in an accordion door. He fell and cut his chin, requiring seven stitches. He got snapped in the face with a bungee strap and hit by a toy. None of them triggered a new investigation.

As family grows, so do problems

The Hollands were moving ahead with their plan to adopt Ricky and Trevor as well as the 11-month-old foster boy. That child remained with them until January 2003; he was moved after caseworkers recommended that relatives adopt him, enabling him to be raised with siblings.

It turned out Trevor had problems, too, but they were different from Ricky's. Lisa once told his adoption worker that he had been diagnosed with failure to thrive, a potentially serious condition characterized by a failure to gain weight or develop properly. He had lost weight after coming to the Hollands, though investigators later were never able to confirm the cause.

But Trevor did have developmental delays; Lisa was taking him twice a week for physical and speech therapy. The Hollands also agreed to work with him at home, moving his limbs and stimulating his facial muscles.

From the beginning, Jackson County DHS workers had not acted on the advice of Ricky's therapist that he should be the only child in a foster home. The Hollands would get two more in 2003: 2-month-old Sarah, Ricky's half-sister, in February, and Lisa's 2-year-old nephew, whose parents had neglected him, in July.

Under control or out of control?

Nevertheless, to Ricky's adoption worker, Melissa Sewell, the Hollands seemed to have everything under control.

"After visiting the foster home and seeing Ricky interact with Tim and Lisa Holland, it seems there could not be a better family for Ricky. He has taken Tim and Lisa on as his parents and says he will do anything for them and will never leave them. Ricky is very attached to the Hollands," she wrote in March 2003. The Hollands adopted Ricky in October.

But a state licensing worker who later checked into whether the Hollands should be allowed to have more than four foster children had reservations about the household.

Noting that Ricky's behavior had gotten worse, Janice Tribble said it didn't seem to be a good plan to have so many young children in the home "with a destructive, angry 6-year-old who has escalating behavior problems."

"How will one person keep all of these children safe when the other person is working?"

COMING WEDNESDAY: Two secrets and drug therapy.

Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

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INVESTIGATING ABUSE OR NEGLECT

After Ricky, state closes hole in rules

December 4, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Before the Ricky Holland case, Child Protective Services workers were not required to interview the person who made a complaint of suspected abuse or neglect.

In Ricky's case, a Jackson County CPS investigator did not speak with Susan Honeck, the therapist who reported that Ricky had told her his foster parents were tying him to the bed at night and using handcuffs to restrain him.

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The investigator spoke with Ricky and Tim and Lisa Holland, and closed the case without confirming abuse.

CPS workers now are required to speak with so-called mandated reporters -- people who work with children, such as teachers, therapists and social workers, and who are required to call CPS when they suspect abuse or neglect.

A mandated reporter can be charged with a misdemeanor for failing to make a report. In Ricky's case, no one was ever charged with failing to report suspicions of mistreatment.

The state Department of Human Services now also requires CPS supervisors to attend the same eight weeks of training as investigators.

Over the last decade, complaints of child maltreatment in Michigan rose slightly from 124,135 in 1996 to 126,690 in 2006, the most recent data available.

But the number of cases confirmed by CPS investigators jumped nearly a third -- from 12,002 in 1996 to 17,523 in 2006.

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Lincoln Park man charged in sex assault, death of infant daughter

December 3, 2007

By ZLATI MEYER

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A 21-year-old Lincoln Park man has been charged with murder, sexual misconduct and child abuse in the death of his severely-injured 8-day-old daughter.

According to police, Christopher Richardson abused baby Nevaeh so severely that after she was brought in critical condition on Nov. 23, hospital staffers contacted the Lincoln Park Police Department. At 2:25 a.m. on Nov. 24, approximately 2 1/2 hours after they were called, Nevaeh died. An autopsy determined the death was a homicide.

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Richardson is charged with felony murder, which carries a mandatory life sentence without parole; first-degree criminal sexual conduct, punishable by a maximum sentence of life in prison; and first-degree child abuse, punishable for up to 15 years.

This is an extreme case, even for the most veteran officer out there," Lincoln Park Police Det. M. Nasser said.

Defense attorney Robert Boyd could not be reached for comment.

Currently, the suspect is being held on \$100,000 bond on a third-degree domestic violence charge. Richardson allegedly assaulted the infant's mother, Cynthia Goscicki, on Nov. 24, but the 21-year-old wasn't hospitalized, Nasser explained.

"The facts in this case are extremely disturbing," Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said today. "It's an abomination that a child cannot exist for eight days without being abused... There is no way to make sense of this."

Richardson has two prior domestic-violence convictions and is on probation for another matter in Ogemaw County, which is in the northeastern part of the Lower Peninsula .

His preliminary exam before Judge David Bajorek is scheduled for Wednesday at 9 a.m. in 25th District Court in Lincoln Park.

Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071203/NEWS02/71203049>

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Tuesday, December 4, 2007

Lincoln Park

Dad charged in baby's death

Lincoln Park man denies sexually assaulting, killing 8-day-old infant, describing acts as 'psychotic' in court.

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

LINCOLN PARK -- Prosecutors charged a Lincoln Park man Monday in the sexual assault and death of his 8-day-old daughter, who died from massive bleeding and blood poisoning after the attack.

Christopher Ryan Richardson, 21, was charged with felony murder, first-degree criminal sexual conduct and first-degree child abuse.

The murder charge carries a mandatory sentence of life in prison without parole, while the maximum penalties for the other two charges are life in prison and 15 years, respectively.

Richardson vehemently denied the charges during his arraignment Monday before District Court Judge David A. Bajorek, calling the acts "psychotic."

"Never in my life would I do some (expletive) like this," Richardson said. Several people in 25th District Court shed tears but declined to comment afterward.

The charges came after Nevaeh Ann Richardson was rushed to Henry Ford Wyandotte Hospital bleeding on the day after Thanksgiving shortly before midnight.

She died the following day, and the Wayne County Medical Examiner ruled her death a homicide.

The infant also suffered from bruises on her arms, legs and head and injuries to her genitals before she died, Worthy added.

"We in law enforcement have seen many horrendous crimes, but this is one of the worst when someone will harm an 8-day-old infant," she said.

Nevaeh, which is heaven spelled backward, was living with Richardson, her mother and paternal grandmother when the crime happened.

Richardson was charged last week with domestic violence, third offense, for allegedly assaulting and threatening the child's mother on the night Nevaeh was taken to the hospital.

He was being held in the Lincoln Park jail with a cash bond of \$100,000.

Bajorek increased Richardson's bond to \$1 million with the three new charges, noting that Richardson recently failed to appear in a Southgate court for an assault and battery charge and for a probation violation in Roscommon.

With his head hung and tears occasionally streaming down his face, Richardson asked Bajorek if he could take blood or lie detector tests to prove his innocence.

"I didn't do it, man," Richardson insisted.

A preliminary hearing will be held Tuesday on Richardson's domestic violence charge.

A preliminary examination for Richardson on the murder and assault charges is scheduled for Dec. 11 at 1:30 p.m.

You can reach Kim Kozlowski at (313) 222-2024 or kkozlowski@detnews.com.

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ClickOnDetroit.com

Accused Dad: 'I Didn't Do This'

POSTED: 12:23 pm EST December 3, 2007

UPDATED: 5:54 pm EST December 3, 2007

LINCOLN PARK, Mich. -- A 21-year-old Lincoln Park father was arraigned Monday on charges that he sexually assaulted and murdered his 8-day-old daughter.

During the hearing, Christopher Richardson vehemently denied that he committed the acts, repeating, "I didn't do this" to the judge and his family.

He asked the judge if he could "give blood or something to prove that I didn't do this, man."

Earlier Monday, Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy held a news conference to give details on what Richardson is accused of doing to his infant daughter, Neveah Richardson.

Richardson had been charged with domestic violence in the beating of his wife. Added to that charge Monday afternoon was murder, sexual assault and criminal sexual conduct against his baby.

Neveah had died as a result of an anal intrusion that caused "massive internal bleeding and sepsis" (infected blood), Worthy said in the news conference.

At his arraignment, Richardson continuously denied he was responsible for "this psychotic, sick shit."

"I never in my life would do shit like this," he said. "Ever."

Police said Neveah's mother told them that she woke up with her daughter on her chest and found her bleeding from the face and mouth.

When Richardson was brought to the hospital, health officials said she was bleeding from the nose, mouth and rectum.

Lincoln Park Police Chief Thomas Karnes said during a news conference last week that the father beat the baby's mother on the way to the hospital. The grandparents, too, were in the car, he said.

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Video: Dad Charged In Baby Death



Plea considered in child sex case

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

The Grand Rapids Press

ROCKFORD -- A Plainfield Township man is considering pleading guilty to one charge of first-degree criminal sexual conduct with a person younger than 13, authorities said.

The Kent County prosecutor would drop two charges of second-degree and another charge of first-degree criminal sexual conduct against 44-year-old Scott Walter Draves.

Police claim Draves lived in a home that was licensed as a private day care facility and he engaged in the acts with a person there who was younger than 13.

The plea proposal would not affect the length of Draves' potential sentence if he is found responsible.

Draves waived his probable cause hearing in Rockford District Court on Monday, moving the felony charges to Kent County Circuit Court.

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ClickOnDetroit.com

Sperm Donor May Have To Pay Child Support

Child Now 18 Years Old

POSTED: 11:51 pm EST December 3, 2007

WESTBURY, N.Y. -- A sperm donor may have to pay child support after the mother's lawyer argued that the man has sent birthday cards and otherwise acted like a father to the teenage child.

A Nassau County Family Court judge recently blocked the man from seeking a paternity test. The man's lawyer, Deborah Kelly, said the Nov. 16 ruling sets the stage for a magistrate to determine how much her client may owe in support.

The man donated sperm to a co-worker and her female partner in the late 1980s. He has testified that they verbally agreed he wouldn't have any rights in the child's upbringing. But he put his name on the child's birth certificate, sent letters signed "Dad," and has talked to the child on the phone.

The child is now 18. The parties in the case are anonymous because of privacy concerns.

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AP Image

A man who donated sperm to a co-worker and her female partner in the late 1980s has testified that they verbally agreed he wouldn't have any rights in the child's upbringing.

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Mayor's spokesman pleads guilty

December 3, 2007

By KATHLEEN GRAY

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Matt Allen, the volatile spokesman for Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, pleaded guilty Monday to misdemeanor charges of domestic violence and attempted resisting and obstructing a police officer.

He was scheduled for a preliminary examination on Dec. 13, but worked out a plea deal with the Wayne County Prosecutor's office and appeared in court Monday with no prior notice. The charges stem from a Nov. 2 incident when Allen came home from a social outing and got into a physical altercation with his wife, Tania Allen. According to police reports, Tania Allen told police that her husband had shoved her into a wall and bathroom window, causing the window to break.

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When police came to the home, they described a combative, visibly intoxicated Allen who yelled and swore at officers to get out of house, elbowed one of the officers in the stomach and demanded that they not arrest him, saying he would call Police Chief Ella Bully-Cummings. At a press conference after his release from jail, a tearful Allen said he knew that he had a problem and was going to check himself into a treatment program.

On Monday, District Judge Ruth Carter, who handles the domestic violence cases in 36th District Court, sentenced Allen to 1 year of probation. He also will be required to attend 26 weeks of batterer's counseling and continue with substance abuse treatment and undergo a psychiatric evaluation and random drug and alcohol testing, as well as refraining from any assaultive contact with his wife.

Maria Miller, spokeswoman for the Wayne County Prosecutor's office, said the plea deal worked out with Allen "is pretty much a standard plea for that type of case."

Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/artikkel?Avis=C4&Dato=20071203&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=71203052&Ref=AR>



Tuesday, December 4, 2007

Mayor's press aide pleads to 2 charges

Judge puts Kilpatrick spokesman on probation for misdemeanors in altercation with wife last month.

Norman Sinclair / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- Matt Allen, a spokesman for Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, pleaded guilty Monday to two misdemeanor charges stemming from an early-morning altercation last month with his wife.

Allen quietly entered the guilty plea to domestic violence before 36th District Judge June Carter rather than face further public scrutiny at a scheduled preliminary examination Dec. 13.

He also pleaded guilty to attempted resisting and obstructing police, a misdemeanor offence reduced from a felony count of resisting and obstructing police, which carries a two-year prison term. The domestic violence charge carries a maximum penalty of 93 days in jail.

"This is a typical plea given by our office for this type of crime," said Assistant Prosecutor Maria Miller, spokeswoman for Wayne County Prosecutor Kym L. Worthy. "If a person knows they want to plead guilty, they will come in and do so before the preliminary exam."

Carter placed Allen on probation for one year and ordered him to attend 26 weeks of batterer's counseling as well as a psychiatric evaluation. He was ordered to continue substance abuse treatment until he is medically discharged. He must also remain drug and alcohol free with random testing, attend parenting classes and have no threatening contact with his wife.

After his arrest and initial court appearance last month, Allen made a tearful public apology, acknowledged he had a problem and said he was checking himself into a treatment facility.

James Canning, a Kilpatrick spokesman, said Allen is still employed with the mayor's office.

The case stemmed from a police call to the Allen home on Seminole at 2:30 a.m. Nov. 2, shortly after Allen had returned from a press party that night. Police and court records showed that Tania Allen said her husband shoved her into a bedroom and then pushed her against a window.

Police records showed the incident was the second one to which police were called to the couple's Indian Village home.

Detroit News Staff Writer Christine MacDonald contributed to this report. You can reach Norman Sinclair at (313) 222-2034 or nsinclair@detnews.com.

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Article published Dec 4, 2007

Pratt set to deny charges

Trace Christenson

The Enquirer

Christopher Pratt is expected to take the witness stand today as the defense presents evidence in the domestic violence case against him.

Pratt, 39, will deny he assaulted his former live-in girlfriend, Norreen Parker, 35, at their rural Marshall home in June, according to his attorney, J. Thomas Schaeffer.

Pratt is charged with domestic violence, felonious assault, destroying a telephone and unlawful imprisonment on June 24. If convicted, he faces up to 15 years in prison.

Pratt is a person of interest in the March 2004 disappearance of Mary Marshall Lands, according to the Marshall Police Department.

Pratt and Lands, 39, were engaged and living together in Marshall when she disappeared. Pratt told police she left their townhouse after an argument but denied any involvement in her disappearance.

Lands has not been seen since, and no arrests have been made in the case.

Last week, Parker, his girlfriend for 18 months, testified that during an argument Pratt threw two chairs at her, smashed the phone when she attempted to call 911 and briefly held her inside the house.

In a rare Monday session in circuit court, jurors heard testimony for only about 20 minutes as Schaeffer, Chief Assistant Prosecutor Daniel Buscher and Calhoun County Circuit Judge Stephen Miller considered for several hours the admission of several pieces of evidence.

- Miller denied a prosecution motion to allow Maureen McNamara, a social worker and therapist with Sexual Assault Services, to testify about domestic violence. Miller said that while McNamara has two master's degrees and years of experience helping victims of domestic violence, she could not be qualified as an expert under the Michigan Rules of Evidence because she has not conducted scientific research or undergone peer review of her work.
- Miller also limited the number of phone calls made by Pratt from his jail cell to his mother that could be introduced by Buscher. Buscher said investigators on Friday located recordings of nearly 23 hours of calls Pratt made since he was arrested the day of the alleged assault and expected they would find several more to other people.

Buscher told the judge Pratt made incriminating statements in some of the calls.

But Miller said only one call made June 25 would be admitted and only after a reference to Mary Lands and to another charge against Pratt involving Parker are erased from the copy to be played to the jury.

Trace Christenson can be reached at 966-0685 or tchrist@battlecr.gannett.com.

STURGIS JOURNAL

Print this story

Lunch money

By Rosalie Currier
Sturgis Journal

Depending on the school district, local students qualifying for free or reduced lunches makes up between 40 and 70 percent of the student population.

And while the free-or-reduced lunch statistics reflect the slumping economy of this area, those numbers actually give a financial boost to the school districts.



According to Bruce Ellis, grant writer for Sturgis Public Schools, the state and federal governments take into account the free or reduced totals among other variables when doling out money. Three sources of significant revenue that take into account free or reduced numbers include Title I, Section 31A and E-rate dollars.

A student from a family of four with an annual gross income of \$37,000 or less may qualify for free or reduced school lunches.

Title I money comes from the federal government, Section 31A is from the state and is money for at-risk students. E-rate dollars help offset technology costs, Ellis said.

Jim Modert, assistant superintendent of Bronson Community, said the government gives additional money for at-risk students as their economic status indicates a possible need for more educational support.

The details about how the figures are calculated for those grants are quite complicated, but another figure that comes into play is the poverty level as reported in the latest census report.

When it's all added together, the total revenue based on free or reduced lunches is significant, but the money is "used to educate all students," Ellis said.

As for the cost of the meals, Modert said the Bronson food service department has to break even whether the dollars come from full-priced, reduced-price or free lunches.

The federal government reimburses for all lunches, but the amount depends on the reported financial standing of the student, he said.

According to charts from the Michigan Department of Education, federal reimbursement for the 2007/2008 school year for full price lunches are 23 to 25 cents per lunch, reduced lunches \$2.07-\$2.09 and free lunches between \$2.47-\$2.49. The districts report their numbers and are reimbursed monthly.

Print Page

The state also helps cover meal costs but the school is reimbursed annually, he said.

Another factor that keeps food service solvent, is that the schools are allowed to set their own lunch prices for those paying full price, Modert said.

Rosalie Currier is a staff writer for the Journal. Contact her at currier@sturgisjournal.com.

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Article published Dec 4, 2007

Times are hard; United Way is forced to cut back as a result

The United Way of Sanilac County is in the midst of a financial crisis. With dwindling resources and an ever-increasing need for services, trying to stretch precious dollars has caused a dilemma for everyone involved.

The decision to cut final quarterly payments to our agencies was done with a heavy heart. I am haunted by the hundreds of phone calls and inquires we receive. I know when we cut funding, we close doors for desperate people.

Funding for the current year is down because citizens are unable to meet their financial pledges. Funding for next year also is down because fewer people can contribute - and many fear for their own economic future.

We all are asked to contribute so much for so many that we must choose carefully where our donated dollars go. Every charity serves a useful purpose, and we need to know our dollars will be spent wisely.

The United Way of Sanilac County provides money to 23 agencies that serve the residents of this county. Each year, our agencies present their needs through an allocation process.

A 25-member board of citizens makes decisions on how donated funds will be used. Each agency must submit a detailed report on how last year's funds were spent and if the goals that were set were met.

They also must present their requests for the upcoming year. At an annual hearing, agencies present their requests and answer questions. An allocation committee reviews all the requests and makes a recommendation to the United Way's full board for final approval and dispersal of funds.

When those funds are distributed, they provide assistance to diverse agencies. They allow children in the foster care system to participate in Scouting. They provide a medical closet where citizens can borrow needed equipment.

Our funds provide legal advice to low income families who may be on the verge of losing their homes and to the elderly. We fund 4-H scholarships and provide counseling through Catholic Family Services. We help the homeless, the abused and the neglected through Safe Horizons, the Harbor, Eva's Place and the Child Abuse Prevention Council. We assist those with mental problems through the Personal Growth Center and help the handicapped through Blue Water Center for Independent Living.

The Salvation Army, H.E.L.P. Inc. and Blue Water provide utility assistance and basic needs. We provide funds that match up foster grandparents with school age children and also match children with big brothers and sisters.

Through the Literacy Council, we can assist adults who need to improve their reading skills. Funds to the Red Cross are used for emergency situations. Habitat uses our money to build houses for low-income families.

The Kids' Connection uses our funds to provide parental counseling so children in foster care can be returned to their homes, and Hospice funds help families deal with the loss of loved ones.

I ask that you carefully consider how much our community gets for each dollar donated to the United Way. Your gift truly does help many people. If you have questions, please call (810) 359-7300.



Early requests overwhelm

Toys for Tots

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

By Holly Klaft

Journal Staff Writer

GENESEE COUNTY - Toys for Tots is coming up short on playthings as thousands of wish lists from needy children roll in with the holiday season.

The nonprofit has received more than 1,700 requests for toys from Genesee County families, and although donation bins are packed with items, the organization is struggling to fill the order.

"That's a lot more than we've ever had this early in the holiday season," said Patty Johnston, a local coordinator for Toys for Tots. "Wednesday was the first time ever that I had to quit packing three days into the season because I ran out of toys. I had nothing."

Johnston said the organization typically provides children with about three toys suitable for their age.

Bratz dolls, craft kits, My Little Pony, Polly Pocket, Legos, Transformers action figures and Spider-Man toys are among items in high demand, she said.

The organization's collection campaign runs through Dec. 17, she said.

New, unwrapped toys can be dropped off at a variety of locations, including Art Van furniture stores, Toys "R" Us stores and Bentley High School.

For more information on Toys for Tots or a list of donation sites, visit www.toysfortots.org.

- Holly Klaft

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Schauer honored for work on behalf of kids

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

State Sen. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek, was recently honored for his work on behalf of children.

Michigan's Children recognized Schauer at its eighth annual ``Much Ado About Something Wonderful" on Nov. 27.

Schauer was one of four to receive the organization's 2007 Legislative Hero designation for helping to make Michigan a place where all children have the opportunity to thrive.

Michigan's Children is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan children's advocacy organization.

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Published December 4, 2007

What's next

- Representatives of the state and the unions will make their cases to an impasse panel.
- The panel will make recommendations to the Civil Service Commission.
- The commission has the final say.

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2 additional state worker unions reject tentative pacts

Cases expected to go to panel; commission to get final say

Chris Andrews
Lansing State Journal

Two unions representing more than 11,000 state government workers rejected tentative contracts Monday.

Members of the 8,800-member Michigan Corrections Organization - representing corrections officers and forensics officers - turned down a three-year pact by a 54 percent to 46 percent margin, according to MCO executive director Mel Grieshaber.

The 2,400 workers represented by AFSCME Council 25 narrowly defeated their pact, 51 percent to 48 percent, with the other ballots spoiled. The union represents housekeepers, licensed practical nurses, food service workers and others.

All of the agreements with state unions call for no raise in October 2008, a 1 percent raise in October 2009 and a 3 percent raise in October 2010.

The state and the unions now are expected to present their cases to an impasse panel, which will make recommendations to the Civil Service Commission. The commission has the final say.

Changes in overtime provisions and increased premiums and co-pays for health insurance were factors in members turning the contract down, Grieshaber said.

"They are frustrated, ultimately thinking they are doing a helluva job, a terrible job, and that the state

is not recognizing it," he said. "They believed that they are not getting due consideration from the state that they are protecting."

AFSCME spokesman Ed McNeil said members were concerned about job security and higher health care premiums. "People were saying the state is talking about laying them off, and they weren't going to ratify a contract and cut their pay at the same time," he said.

Liz Boyd, spokeswoman for Gov. Jennifer Granholm, said the governor's office would decline comment until the process is completed.

The Michigan State Employees Association, which represents plumbers and electricians, maintenance workers and others, turned its contract down last month. Members of the Service Employees International Union Local 517M, representing insurance caseworkers, scientists and engineers and their supports staff, and UAW Local 6000, representing about 17,000 probation officers, social workers, secretaries and others, ratified theirs.

Contact Chris Andrews at 377-1054 or candrews@lsj.com.

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